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HARBOR INDEPENDENT NEWS

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Program

TopSail Kids at the Helm

Youth Sailing Program Trains Children for Life

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NEWS ARTICLE

What the TopSail Program is About: Challenges that Shape Lives, Attitudes

By Arthur R. Vinsel, Community News Reporter

One summer day in 1933, a little boy clambered into a 12-foot Snowbird sailboat on what seemed a boundless bay off Balboa Island, where his family camped in a tent on a sandy, cottage-dotted beach.

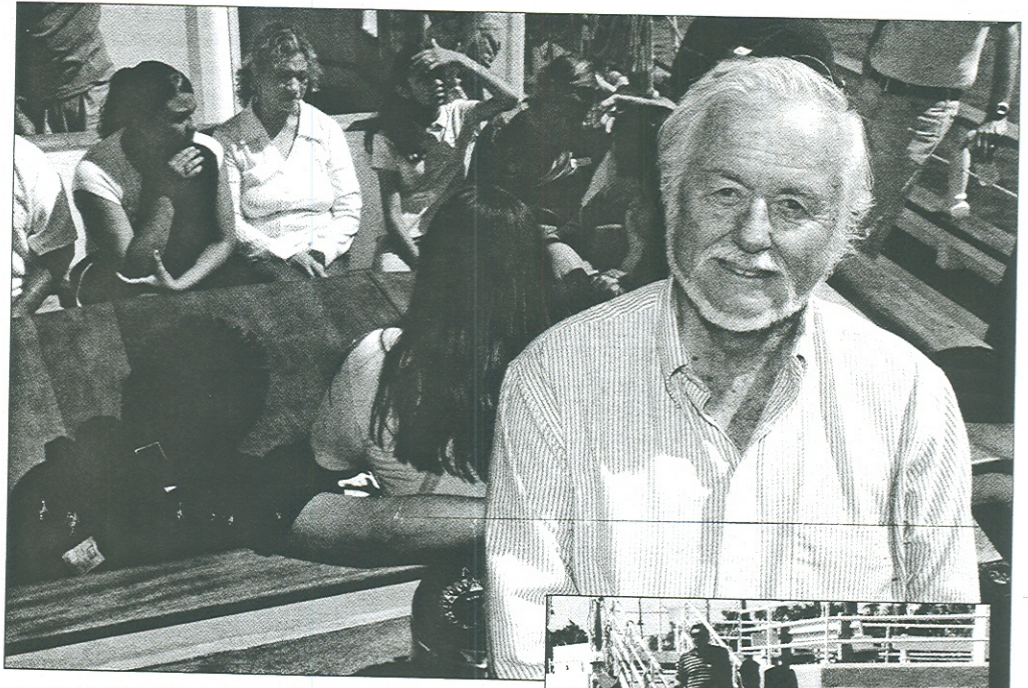
The master of the vessel, a family friend affluent enough despite the Great Depression to summer in Newport, gave three-year old Jimmy Gladson a task. He pointed to the centerboard trunk's slot, in which fits the centerboard, a removable keel, that kept the small boat steady.

Through this opening a school of tiny hatchling fish could be seen swimming along, learning about their own watery world in the shelter of the boat's shadow.

"Your job is to watch and make sure the water doesn't start coming into the boat and sink us," the avuncular skipper teased. The toddler bent dutifully over the opening, a tiny window into the ocean, ready to sound the alarm if the bobbing boat began taking on seawater. Of course, the slotted fixture was designed so that couldn't happen, but the tot took his duty seriously.

"I kept my head bent over it the whole time. Whenever I think of that day I first became fascinated with sailing, I can still feel heat from the sunburn I got on the back of my neck," reflects Capt. Jim Gladson, 75, skipper and CEO of the Los Angeles Maritime Institute (LAMI) TopSail Youth Program.

Gladson has kept his eye on the water for seven decades since, living beside or on it, a high school science teacher-turned-life-mentor to thousands of youngsters. Some, born into L.A.'s barrios and ghettos aged 10 to 13, have never even seen the ocean until TopSail brings them here.



Above, TopSail kids on the twin brigantine the *Exy Johnson* with Captain Jim Gladson in the foreground. Right, kids walk up the gang plank to a learning adventure on the high seas. Photos: Bernard Kane.

Viewed by some as a revolutionary approach to education, the program—offered by LAMI, a nonprofit foundation begun in 1992 as an affiliate of the Los Angeles Maritime Museum—is simple in concept. But it is successful beyond Gladson's greatest hopes. It developed as an outgrowth of the 1970s creation of the first magnet campus in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the Area D Alternative School that initially met for eight weeks on the sand at Venice beach. Methods employed in establishing the school were perhaps new and liberal, but not out of line with the scholastic mood of those times. And they made immense common sense.

"The first four schools were unique

in that students, parents and staff formed a three-part governing council. They were genuinely managed by this council, including voting on school spending and the curriculum. They actually did staff hiring and firing by vote," Gladson explains.

However, to prevent a student majority from



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Students—kids—the self-selected volunteers for this unusual new educational concept, were instigators

"He said he was always 'mightily

"The kids had come

By Arthur R. Vinsel
Community News Reporter

That first picture of the youngsters then in a Los Angeles Unified School District's experimental magnet alternative school program—now middle aged—symbolize the spirit of the TopSail youth program that grew out of it.

"That's Debbie there," he says, pointing to a girl. "She had a terrible time in junior high." Chipper changed through the sailing course and so did he and many others.

Gladson recalls with a wry grin on his neatly bearded face, appearing almost a stand-in for John Barrymore in that old movie "Down to the Sea in Ships."

"I took early retirement so we could reach larger numbers of kids," he explains. "It took me a long time to understand the fundamental positive things that were happening with these

Olesen, who died several years ago, was an epic poet at heart with a flair for the florid in his speech.

for all sorts of reasons," says Gladson. No one was assigned to our magnet or alternative school. Some were just not challenged enough. They found regular school *boooooorrrriinnngggg!* Others wanted to escape the gang activity. Others wanted to escape a

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